



# Youth Radicalization: Somali identity and support for Al-Shabaab in the U.K., the U.S., and Canada

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**CANADIAN FRIENDS OF SOMALIA**

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Like many other young Westerners, Mohamed Elmi Ibrahim was attending university, majoring in English.<sup>i</sup> He maintained a blog where he posted pictures of pilgrimages to Mecca; unsurprising for a young Muslim publicly displaying his faith. Ibrahim's blog also contained pictures of snow-filled landscapes featuring the northern lights; also unsurprising for a young Canadian.<sup>ii</sup> In 2009, however, he diverged from the usual path of a second-generation Somali living in Canada, and disappeared. He was not alone. That same year, five other young Canadians of Somali decent went missing.<sup>iii</sup> It was feared that Ibrahim –and the five others– were lured into joining al-Shabaab (Arabic for “The Youth”), a terrorist group that is not only engaged in a local fight against the Somali government, but that has also aligned itself with al Qaeda to fight to the global jihad.<sup>iv</sup> In March 2010, a video posted on the Internet not only confirmed that Ibrahim had indeed joined the ranks of al-Shabaab, but posted his eulogy: Ibrahim had died in combat.

Unfortunately, other young Somalis living in the West have been the subjects of similar fates. Most notable was Shirwa Ahmed who left Minneapolis to join al-Shabaab. In 2008, he drove a bomb-laden vehicle that exploded in northern Somalia, infamously becoming the first American suicide bomber.<sup>v</sup> At the time of writing this report, approximately 40 American-Somalis are thought to have participated in al-Shabaab's insurgency, whereas in Canada, the estimates are closer to 20 Canadian-Somalis.<sup>vi</sup> Somali jihadists of Western citizenship do not only stem from North America. Somali youth living in Britain are also alleged to have joined Al Shabaab<sup>vii</sup>, while young Somalis have also been arrested on terrorism charges in the Netherlands<sup>viii</sup> and Australia<sup>ix</sup>.

For these reasons, the lure of Al Shabaab has become a major concern for Western countries. During the summer of 2011, the American congress organized a series of hearings on the radicalization of Muslim-Americans. The third hearing, held on July 27<sup>th</sup>, focused on al-Shabaab and its links to al-Qaeda, its partnerships with al-Qaeda's affiliates, as well as its success in recruiting Western citizens. In describing the threat that represents al-Shabaab, the hearings' chairman Peter T. King claimed: "Not al-Qaeda, nor any of its other affiliates, have come close to drawing so many Muslim-Americans and Westerners to jihad." Although the threat is clear, precisely why youth from the Somali diasporas leave their countries to join al-Shabaab remains poorly understood.

### **A response by the Canadian Friends of Somalia:**

It is in this context that the Canadian Friends of Somalia (CFS), a non-profit organization serving the Somali community of Canada, has made it its mission to better understand how Somali youth become involved with al-Shabaab. Through a better understanding of the factors motivating youth to join an extremist group, the CFS is seeking to be better equipped to detract them from this self-destructive endeavor. To fulfill this goal, CFS conducted an international survey to identify factors related to the radicalization of Somali youth living in Western countries.

To be clear, The CFS is not a research institution; it is a community-based organization that provides social services to the Somali diaspora. This research, however, is aligned with CFS's mandate of community service. As many people in the Somali community –as well as outside– have increasingly expressed worry about Somali youth, CFS' executive committee has deliberated about various initiatives to address this worry. Research aimed at understanding youth involvement with al-Shabaab emerged as the most valuable first step. Recognizing that research is beyond its normal range of activities, the CFS enlisted the assistance of Michael King, who is trained in social psychology, studies radicalization, and is well-versed in community-based research methodology. Together, CFS and King have summarized their research endeavor in the present report.

In the next section of this report, the first phase of the research is described, which entailed building a theory of youth radicalization. Following this is a summary of the data-collection phase of the research, during which a survey was conducted with Somali youth across three Western countries. Thereafter, an analysis of the data is presented with the goal of determining if the survey results support our theory of youth radicalization. The final section of the present report offers several recommendations based on the research findings.

### **Understanding Youth Radicalization:**

Much has been written about the radicalization of young Muslims in Western countries who become involved in violent jihad. Within this vast literature, security experts and social scientists have offered many theories about how this occurs.<sup>x</sup> To effectively review the current state of knowledge about radicalization, CFS organized an international conference convening security experts, policy makers, law enforcement officials, academics, and community leaders. Most notably was the additional presence of Somali diaspora members from the UK, Sweden, Holland, USA, and Canada. This conference was held in Ottawa, December 6-7 2010, under the banner *Promoting Peace and Preventing Youth Radicalization*, with the expressed goal of understanding why Somali youth in Western countries join al-Shabaab.

### **Conference: Convening Expertise:**

From the various presentations and discussions held during the conference, a theory of radicalization emerged. Experts, academics, law enforcement officials, and Somali youth themselves commonly pointed to the mismanagement of the dual-identity held by 2<sup>nd</sup> generation immigrants as a central factor to youth radicalization. Somali youth living in the West must manage a heritage identity inherited from their family at the same time as they wrestle with internalizing some form of identity conferred by their country of residence.<sup>xi</sup> For some youth, already confronted by identity-construction tasks typical during

adolescence, managing these two identities can be especially difficult.<sup>xii</sup> These challenges – many conference attendees claimed– can somehow lead youth to explore and eventually embrace violent jihad.

It is important to highlight that the centrality of identity to youth radicalization emerged as a *theory*. That is, this notion was rooted in the educated supposition of academics, the professional insights of security officials, and the personal experiences of Somali diaspora members. No empirical evidence was presented at the conference to support this notion. Nevertheless, in having so many experts –as well as youth themselves– describing similar identity-related processes leading to radicalization, CFS had obtained a clear focal point to begin its research project.

The conference attendees’ focus on identity accurately reflected the growing consensus among many terrorism researchers about identity as having a role in the radicalization process leading to violence.<sup>xiii</sup> To be clear, researchers are not referring to personal identities, but rather group-level identities, such as those based on occupation, gender, ethnicity, geography, and of course, religion. When individuals consider themselves as part of a social category, in other words they *identify* with a group, this identity becomes psychologically important, and can be the basis for various behaviours.<sup>xiv</sup>

After the *Promoting Peace and Preventing Youth Radicalization* conference, CFS and its academic collaborator Michael King further developed a theory of youth radicalization. This theory was to remain anchored in the experiences of conference attendees, yet also aligned with established academic research from social psychology and terrorism studies. Moreover, this theory had to be testable using a survey methodology. This resulted in an identity-centered theory of youth radicalization, which is presented next.

### **An Identity-Centered Theory of Youth Radicalization:**

Three factors are thought to increase the likelihood for Somali youth in a Western country to radicalize and ultimately join al-Shabaab. First is the failure to successfully internalize their bicultural identity by rejecting Western identity. Second is a heightened interest in Islam, which can sometimes lead one to explore jihadi ideology. The third factor is the appeal of jihadism, which emphasizes bravado, adventure, and the glorification of violence.

Independently, each of these factors is insufficient to raise the likelihood of radicalization. For example, an increased interest in Islam can lead to positive personal and social outcomes when unaccompanied by the two other factors. We contend, however, that under the circumstances where an individual rejects Western culture (factor 1) and finds jihadism personally appealing (factor 3), an increased interest in Islam (factor 2) raises the likelihood for radicalization to occur. A detailed explanation of each factor is offered next.

#### ***Factor 1: Bicultural identity integration failure & rejecting Western identity:***

Somali youth living in Canada, like many others, must integrate two collective identities. Immigrants, the children of immigrants, First Nations, and children of bi-cultural parents, all must psychologically integrate a heritage culture with its corresponding identity, along with a mainstream Canadian culture and its corresponding identity.

Much research has been devoted to understanding the adaptation of those faced with integrating the identities arising from two different cultures. As a whole, findings suggest that bicultural youth do learn to comfortably navigate their two cultures, and generally adopt aspects of both identities. An individual can thus feel both Somali and Canadian, without having to favor one identity over the other.<sup>xv</sup> Although conflicts may sometimes arise from living in two different cultures, bicultural individuals tend to be psychologically as well-adjusted as their mono-cultural peers.<sup>xvi</sup> Furthermore, clearly

understanding ones' bicultural identity has been linked to increased self-esteem and well-being.<sup>xvii</sup> More pertinent to this research, however, is the claim made by some experts that developing a dual-identity, or at least internalizing aspects of North-American cultural values, may inoculate bicultural individuals against radicalization.<sup>xviii</sup>

Unfortunately, some individuals do not effectively internalize their two cultural identities. There exists a multitude of reasons for this to happen. For simplicity, however, barriers to identity integration can be categorized along two dimensions.<sup>xix</sup> First are barriers that are external to the individual; these mostly concern the acceptance of others. For example, research has illustrated how despite feeling just as American as their peers, Asian-Americans report being perceived as less American than their mainstream peers, and being treated as foreigners in daily interactions.<sup>xx</sup> In such circumstances, a minority group member's Western identity is "denied" by mainstream others.

Second are barriers that are internal to the individual; these mostly concern motivation. Indeed, those who are faced with internalizing two cultures, first and foremost, must *want* to internalize each culture. Here, it is important to distinguish between those who might apathetically lack motivation to acculturate from those who actively seek to reject a specific culture. According to our theory, it is the active rejection that constitutes the first step in the radicalization process.

To be clear, Somali-Canadian youth are faced with a psychological task they have little control over: they must integrate two cultures as part of their identity. By living in Canada, they are subjected to Canadian culture and bestowed a Canadian identity. They also possess Somali heritage, an undeniable feature that differentiates them from mainstream Canadians. Many –if not most– comfortably internalize this dual identity. In some cases though, Western identity is not only avoided, it is actively rejected.

The rejection of Western mainstream culture can be expressed in a variety of ways, from art and activism to criminality and violence.<sup>xxi</sup> How youth choose to express this rejection may largely depend on the framework they find to structure what many describe as a vague, simplistic, and often naïve hostility towards mainstream culture. The danger is that among other ideologies, jihadism is readily available, and it offers validation, coherence and structure for their negative attitudes regarding the West. To become interested in jihadism, however, two other psychological factors must also be present in the individual. One of these factors is an interest in Islam, which we describe next.

### ***Factor 2: Heightened interest in Islam:***

By itself, the rejection of Western culture cannot account for youth radicalization. Among the bicultural youth who do reject the Western dimension of their identity, the vast majority do not radicalize towards jihadism. To begin exploring jihadism, we contend that those who reject Western culture must also experience a heightened interest in Islam.

For some Muslims living in Western countries, this heightened interest has been instigated by the attacks of September 11 2001 and the ensuing public debate about Islam.<sup>xxii</sup> Research in the US and the UK describe how many Muslims asserted their religious identity in reaction to negative media coverage of Islam and the discrimination that followed 9/11.<sup>xxiii</sup> Alongside the negative attention brought upon Muslims, 9/11 also aroused a genuine curiosity about Islam by people of all faiths. This widespread public curiosity has seemingly led many young Canadian Muslims to learn more about Islam.<sup>xxiv</sup>

It is through their attempts to learn about Islam that some youth may out of curiosity explore jihadism. Lectures, books, essays, and even magazines advocating jihadi ideology are easily found, and the Internet allows for easy access to a vast array of informative and visually compelling sources for interested youth. For those becoming acquainted with its tenets, jihadism may be appealing as it offers a coherent framework for understanding their hostility towards Western culture.



Among those who resonate to jihadism's anti-Western doctrine, many will find its extremity and rigidity unpalatable. Some, however, will not, and venture to learn more. These individuals are on the cusp of beginning the radicalization process. At this point, we contend that a major factor that ultimately leads youth to radicalize is the sub-culture surrounding jihadism. The features rendering this sub-culture attractive are discussed next.

### **Factor 3: The lure of jihadi culture:**

The final factor in our theory of radicalization is personal resonance with jihadi sub-culture. Youth, especially young men, might be motivated to explore the ideology because of its accompanying lifestyle, which involves secrecy, adventure, danger, and heroism. Although violence is generally considered to be morally wrong, the violence perpetrated by jihadists is framed in righteousness, piety, and the fight against injustice. Terrorist observer Jessica Stern claims that for some young Muslims in the West, “jihad is a cool way of expressing dissatisfaction with power elite”.<sup>xxv</sup> Experts have echoed this observation by suggesting that sensation seeking underlies the motivations of many individuals charged with homegrown terrorism.<sup>xxvi</sup> One such expert, Marc Sageman, states that: “Global Islamist terrorists see themselves as warriors in pursuit of fame and glory”.<sup>xxvii</sup>

It is thus not a surprise to find al-Shabaab exploiting the allure of the jihadi sub-culture in its recruitment efforts. Omar Hammami, an American Muslim who has joined and risen through the ranks of al-Shabaab, has produced half-a-dozen English rap songs since 2009 aimed at attracting young Western Muslims to join the global jihad.<sup>xxviii</sup> His rhymes focus on themes of bravado, self-sacrifice, and injustice, often interspersed with the names of high-tech weapons used by Western armies.

The identity-centered theory of youth radicalization thus consists of three independent factors that, when combined, increase the likelihood that a Somali youth living in the west would radicalize to the point of espousing jihadism. While different avenues are

available to conduct jihad, supporting and ultimately joining al-Shabaab may appear as the most obvious avenue for Somali youth.

### Testing the theory:

To test its identity-centered theory of youth radicalization, CFS designed a survey that was completed by Somali youth living in the U.K., the U.S., and Canada. In line with being the organization's first research project, CFS kept the survey simple and short, focusing only on testing the theory's two initial factors. The first factor, *bicultural identity integration failure & rejecting Western identity*, was assessed by asking youth about their Somali,

Muslim, and Western identities. The theory's second factor, the *heightened interest in Islam*, was assessed by asking youth about their level of religiosity since September 11, 2001. The survey also included questions to determine youth's attitudes towards al-Shabaab, which was used as a simplistic proxy indicator of "radicalization".

If the survey findings were to support the identity-centered theory of youth radicalization, a pattern of results would emerge. Specifically, youth who excluded the Western identity from their identity (factor 1) and reported an increase in religiosity since 9/11 (factor 2) would also report the highest levels of support for al-Shabaab (a proxy for radicalization).

## Research Method

### Recruitment:

Several strategies were undertaken to recruit Somali youth for this research project. The CFS contacted various Somali youth organizations located in the US, Canada, and the UK to help advertise its survey. Each organization hosted Somali youth in a classroom setting to complete the survey, where compensation was given to each participant.

The survey was also made available on the Internet. The CFS used various social-media platforms to advertise the survey, such as Facebook, Linked-In, and Twitter. An internet-link was also posted on the CFS website which redirected youth to the online survey. The CFS also sent emails to various members of the diaspora announcing the survey and inviting youth to participate. Moreover, the survey was advertised on websites often visited by Somali youth, such as hiiraan.com, somalinet.com & somaliaonline.com. Participation was restricted to residents of the United States, Canada, and Britain, between the ages of 16 to 25 that identified as Somali.

### **Respondents:**

In total, 357 youth completed the online survey, of these, 105 were completed by women and 252 by men, with approximately half (53.5%) of the sample between the ages of 23 and 25. The largest portion (161 or 45.1%) was from the United States, while 121 (or 33.9%) were from Canada, and 75 (or 21%) from Britain. The majority of respondents (204 or 57.1%) were university students, while 83 (23.2%) were in high school; others either had full-time or part-time employment, or were in search of work.

### **Survey:**

The online survey, and its corresponding printed version, could be divided into three broad sections. The first section contained demographic questions about age, gender, occupation, and country of residence.

The second section contained a question assessing youth's perception of their collective identity. Here, respondents were asked to specify which categories –among four– best described their identity. Respondents could choose Somali or Muslim, or an identity representing their Western country of residence, such as American, Canadian, or British. They could also select a category that represented a dual-identity, combining their Somali identity with that of their Western country of residence. Respondents could also choose more than one category, thus specifying, for example, their identity as “Somali-Muslim”.

The third section contained questions about religiosity and al-Shabaab. One question assessed respondents increased religiosity after the attacks of September 11, 2001. Here, respondents could answer from 1 (not at all) to 4 (definitely). The last question in this section asked if al-Shabaab fighters were fighting a “just cause”. To answer, respondents could choose from a 3-point scale ranging from “no”, “not sure”, to “yes”.

A concluding section thanked respondents for completing the survey, and contained CFS’ coordinates inviting questions or comments about the research.

### Survey Results:

A statistical breakdown of respondents’ answers is presented next. Here, it is important to note that although 357 youth participated, each respondent did not answer all questions on the survey. Consequently, the following statistics are based on smaller sample sizes.

Table 1 displays how Somali youth, across the three Western countries, categorized their own identity. For each country, the most popular identity category is indicated in **bold**. The statistics in Table 1 indicate that youth living in the United States and Canada were more likely to categorize themselves as bicultural, whereas youth living in the U.K. were more likely to consider themselves as Somali only. These results suggest important attitudinal differences about the West between Somali youth in North America and those in Britain.

**Table 1. Identity categorization of Somali youth**

	U.S. (N=112)	Canada (N=100)	U.K. (N=53)
Only Somali	35.7 %	23.0 %	<b>39.6 %</b>
Only Muslim	8.9 %	16.0 %	13.2 %
Somali-Muslim	14.3 %	6.0 %	26.4 %
Only Western	0.9 %	7.0 %	1.9 %
Somali-Western	<b>40.2 %</b>	<b>48.0 %</b>	18.9 %

Table 2 displays youth's increase of religiosity following 9/11 across the three countries. Canadian- and British-Somali youth report, on average, having slightly greater increases of religiosity following 9/11 as compared to American youth. The same table also contains respondents' support for al-Shabaab. Youth in all three countries uniformly indicated little support for al-Shabaab.

**Table 2. Increased religiosity following 9/11 and support for al-Shabaab**

	U.S.	Canada	U.K.
Increased religiosity			
Mean (on 4-point scale)	1.89	2.22	2.15
Standard deviation	1.07	1.16	1.17
N	116	94	54
Support for al-Shabaab			
Mean (on 3-point scale)	1.48	1.58	1.56
Standard deviation	0.56	0.74	0.72
N	100	76	45

Table 3 contains the statistical relationship between respondents' self-reported increased religiosity after 9/11, and their level of support for al-Shabaab. Here, when youth in the U.S. and the U.K. report an increase in religiosity after 9/11, they also tend to report increased support for al-Shabaab. This statistical relationship is strongest for British-Somali youth, but does not occur for Somali-Canadian youth.

**Table 3. Correlations between Post 9/11 increased religiosity and Support for Shabaab.**

	U.S.	Canada	U.K.
Correlation (r)	.30**	.17	.49***
N	93	69	41

\*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p = .001$

Overall, this pattern of results yields preliminary support for our identity-centered theory of youth radicalization. Based on the presentations and discussions from the *Promoting Peace and Preventing Youth Radicalization* conference, as well as established academic research from social psychology and terrorism studies, we suggested that three psychological factors might be involved in the radicalization process. First is the rejection of one's Western identity, which prevents youth from internalizing their bicultural identity. Second is a heightened interest in Islam. The third factor is the appeal of jihadi sub-culture. The survey results substantiate the first and second factor. When compared to youth in America and Canada, Somali youth in the U.K. were more likely to exclude the Western identity when asked to categorize themselves. Moreover, youth in the U.K. were more likely to support al-Shabaab if their religiosity increased after 9/11.

Thus, the claim made by many that “identity” is somehow involved in youth radicalization does seem founded, and future research is warranted.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Although this research has yielded preliminary support for our identity-centered theory of youth radicalization, it is recommended that further research be conducted. Here, the most pressing objective for future research should be to validate the findings of the present report by conducting additional, more extensive research with Somali youth. Additional dimensions of youth's bicultural identity should be explored, and the allure of jihadi sub-culture should be investigated. Future research might consider obtaining larger samples from more Western countries, while also including other youth for comparison. Should the identity-centered theory of youth radicalization find additional support, CFS and other community-based organizations will be better equipped to intervene with youth.

2. In order to increase our understanding of potential preventative measures regarding our identity-centered theory of youth radicalization among Somali Youth, it is recommended to establish innovative community based programs for Somali youth in the Western Diaspora. These programs should involve youth in all aspects from the programs development to its implementation. A community based dialogue centered on the issue of bicultural identity should be explored, and an open and frank discussion around jihadi sub-culture and Al Shabaab within the community should be established. These programs should include; cross-cultural and diversity training, youth engagement and leadership initiatives, parenting skills and inter-generational conflict, promoting inter-faith dialogue and Islamic Pluralism, promotion of citizenship and civic engagement, and addressing youth grievances.

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- <sup>iv</sup> Cody Curran, *Global Ambitions: An Analysis of al Shabaab's Evolving Rhetoric*, AEI's Critical Threats Project, February 17, 2011. Available at: <http://www.criticalthreats.org/somalia/global-ambitions-analysis-al-shabaabs-evolving-rhetoric-february-17-2011>.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> Henri Tajfel and John C. Turner, "The social identity theory of inter-group behavior," In S. Worchel and L. W. Austin (eds.), *Psychology of Intergroup Relations* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1986).
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- <sup>xvi</sup> Margaret Shih and Diana T. Sanchez, "Perspectives and research on the positive and negative implications of having multiple racial identities," *Psychological Bulletin* 131, No. 4 (2005): 569-591.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Esther Usborne and Donald M. Taylor, "The role of cultural identity clarity for self-concept clarity, self-esteem, and subjective well-being," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 36, no. 7 (2010): 883-897.



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- <sup>xviii</sup> Angel M. Rabasa et al., *The Muslim World after 9/11* (Santa Monica: RAND corporation, 2004): p.444; Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror networks in the twenty-first century* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania Press, 2007), p.98.
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- <sup>xx</sup> Sapna Cheryan and Benoît Monin, "Where Are You Really From? Asian Americans and Identity Denial," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 89, no. 5 (2005): 717–730.
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